Mark Cole

By 2ndLt. Barton O'Brien

When I started flight school few months ago, my father, a former naval aviator, told me, "Never think that it can't happen to you, because it can. And don't get into the mindset that it's always going to be the other guy." The *it* my father was speaking of was an in-flight emergency, or worse, a crash. It would not take long for me to find out just how right he was.

After months of ground school, swimming tests, dunkers, and more ground school, the day of my first flight finally came. There was a low ceiling at Whiting Field that morning, but things were clear in the area that we would be doing most of our flying in. Because my instructor was going to be doing most of the flying on my introductory flight anyway, he filed an IFR flight plan out to the area and away we went.

The flight itself went well. I was all over the sky, but according to my instructor, that is standard for Familiarization Flight 1. I felt good as we headed home. I had gotten a feel for how to trim the airplane, and I recognized most of the landmarks in the area. Most importantly, I was headed home with an empty barf bag. Victory!

We entered IFR conditions again about 10 miles from Whiting. We were at 1,700 feet with an overcast ceiling below us at 850 feet, and another above us at 2,200 feet. All was going smoothly until we got within seven miles of the field. That's when our master-caution light started blinking. I noticed it right away and keyed the ICS to

report it to my instructor (I was convinced he had figured out a way to turn it on just to see what I would do). But, before I could get a word out, he said, "Uh-oh, you see that chip light?" I looked down and saw the yellow chip light on the annunciator panel. He immediately went into his emergency procedures, and I realized that this was not one of the dirty instructor tricks I had heard so much about, but an actual emergency!

My instructor lost no time getting out a "PAN" call, and before I really knew what was going on, he was telling me what secondary indications of engine failure to look for. Once I caught up with him and figured out where he was in the emergency procedure, all the expected secondaries kicked in, and a couple unexpected ones, too.

We were able to climb to about 2,100 feet without breaking the ceiling above us. By the time we reached four miles out, I could smell burning oil fumes in the cockpit. My instructor had me put on my oxygen mask, and he began to point out all the secondaries to me. "Look," he said, "erroneous torque indications. You see that needle moving?" I could hear the excitement in his voice. "You feel those engine surges?" As the engine started to surge and sputter we started to lose altitude, and I noticed the torque needle bouncing from one extreme to the other.

At this point I realized the severity of our situation. I checked the DME and remembered the glide-distance equation from ground school. I did the math in my head. . .this one was going to be close. Doing a PEL into Whiting Field would normally be no problem for any instructor, but we were restricted as to how high we could climb to make the field, and we could not see anything through the clouds below us.

Despite having the power-control lever at idle, our engine continued to sputter and surge. As we started to descend, my instructor told me to look down and let him know when I saw the ground. His visibility from the aft cockpit was not as good as mine, and he asked me several times, "Do you see it?"

Each time, I replied, a little more nervously, "No sir, not yet." We passed 1,000 feet, nothing.

"Do you see it?!"

"Not yet, sir!"

We passed 900 feet, still nothing. Finally, we broke out of the clouds at about 800 feet.

Now there was the matter of getting the plane safely on the ground. We had just enough altitude to make the nearest runway. My instructor put in a sharp turn and entered the landing profile at about 300 feet. He was able to line up the runway, get the flaps down, and make a good landing. We taxied just clear of the runway and shut the engine down. The plane reeked of burning oil, and the crash crew was on the scene before our feet hit the runway. My first flight had come to an end.

The lesson my father taught me was based on experience. During his eight-year career, he witnessed plenty of emergencies, and was even involved in a few. By the time my career was all of one day old, I had already had my first emergency, and I finally understood what he was trying to say. It's not always going to happen to the other guy. It *can* happen to you, and when you least expect it.

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